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ABSTRACT

Reasons for slipping academic standards in U.S. community colleges and a specific program combating this problem are discussed. Two reasons are offered for this slippage; the first has to do with the ambiguous state of the community college faculty. These teachers are said to have difficulty defining their roles because they feel a powerlessness in dealing with the college administration and in having to lower their standards for instruction and grading in dealing with their students. The second major reason for slippage given is the past and present trend toward student consumerism. The current reality of teachers having to resort to advertising for classes and schools having to advertise for easy programs is seen as having a detrimental effect on the attitudes of students and teachers. The vocational education emphasis that the community college has taken is traced, and arguments are offered for and against it. A program, established in two Florida community colleges, that has effectively raised academic standards is briefly described. (JM)

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ACADEMIC STANDARDS IN THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE: TRENDS AND CONTROVERSIES

by

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A paper written for the National Commission on Excellence in Education

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It is very unlikely that any of us so personally involved with higher education can write dispassionately about academic standards--how they are or ought to be established, evaluated, and sustained. With our various disagreements, pet concerns, episodic and sometimes alternating bouts with alarm, despair, indifference and, as this Commission exemplifies, energy and good intentions, academic standards matter importantly to us. At bottom, I think we believe that colleges and universities, whatever else they may do, make students into better people, and better people, the logic continues, make for a better world, a world itself of higher standards. That is not a bad belief, though as an hypothesis it would be difficult to settle one way or the other, and as an institutional ideology it is uncomfortably condescending toward those who stopped after high school or earlier. What, after all, do we mean by "better people" or a "better world"? Do we mean happier, broader, more productive, insightful, physically fit, compassionate, aesthetic, scientific? As articulated in most statements of purpose in most college catalogues the answer, of course, is that we mean all of these things and more. Thus, inasmuch as one of the several dictionary definitions of <u>standard</u> is "a structure built for, or serving as, a base of support for something", we in higher education have indeed, along with society's other major institutions--the family, the church, the state--claimed a mighty mandate. And if, as is widely suspected, academic

standards have eroded, we do in fact worry about the shifting sands upon which civilization rests. Not that we are the first to contemplate the decay of civilization in our time, but the extraordinary and unchecked growth of technology and population in a time of dwindling resources creates a new urgency. We sense the stakes are higher, and that the issue of standards--be they educational, moral, philosophical or political in the sense of having an informed and competent citizenry--is tied to the fate of not just our society, but the planet itself.

* * * *

So far this is a rather grandiose beginning for an essay on exit standards in the community college. Community colleges, however, have almost since their inception some eighty years ago (née "junior colleges") grandiosely advertised themselves as "democracy's colleges", indicating a deliberate, self-conscious and vital linkage between the purposes of the school and the ideals of society. Indeed, the phrase "democracy's college" referred throughout most of the history of community colleges to the providing of opportunities for upward mobility, primarily through transfer to four-year colleges for academic late-bloomers, and to a lesser extent through vocational training for those who could not or would not pursue the baccalaureate. More recently, between 1960 and 1975, the ideological justification for the extraordinary proliferation of community

colleges--their numbers almost doubled and the student body more than quintupled (Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1976)--again appealed to democratic ideals: an open door to the local community for low-cost programs for minorities, women, the underprepared, the lower and working classes, and evening courses for working adults, including homemakers (Astin, 1982, p.141; Vaughan, 1980, p.vii). "New students" Patricia Cross called them in a phrase which is now established in the community college argot; and, on the surface at least, their entrée signalled a democratization of higher education (Cross, 1971).*

Beginning in the 1960's but accelerating rapidly in the 1970's, the national trend among community colleges was away from liberal arts transfer curricula and toward occupational programs.** At the beginning of this decade, 42.6 percent of all associate's degrees awarded were in vocational programs; by 1979-1980, the last year for which statistics are available, they accounted for 62.5 percent of all associate's degrees (see Table I). The array of vocational programs offered by community colleges is astonishing. The twenty-seven community colleges in the state of Washington, for example, offer training in 197 different

*Certainly, some four-year colleges have a large minority or even a majority of "new" students, but the community college is the only class of institution to make a special claim of expertise in and commitment to helping them in large numbers.

** There were, of course, exceptions to this trend, most notably in California and Florida where the community colleges were designed to be "feeder schools" to the public four-year colleges and universities. Even in these states, though, the proportion of vocational students grew steadily during the seventies.

Table I. Associate Degrees Conferred by Institutions of Higher Education by Type of Curriculum, 1970-71 to 1979-80

Year	Curriculums	Arts & Sciences or General Programs	Percentage of Total	Occupational Curriculums	Percentag of Total
1970-71	253,635	145,473	57.4	108,162	42.6
1971-72	294,005	158,496	53.9	135,509	46.1
1972-73	318,234	161,291	50.7	156,943	49.3
1973-74	347,173	165,520	47.7	181,653	52.3
1974-75	362,969	167,634	46.2	195,335	53.9
1975-76	395,393	176,612	44.7	218,781	55.3
1976-77	409,942	172,631	42.1	237,311	57.9
1977-78	416,947	168,052	40.3	248,895	59.7
1978-79	407,471	158,738	39.0	248,733	61.0
1979-80	405,378	152,169	37.5	253,209	62.5

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (1978, 1981).

occupations from horseshoeing to operating room technician (see Appendix 1). A second major trend in the 1970's was the eagerness of community colleges to provide courses, for credit or otherwise, in just about any subject for any group of seven people who wanted it, whether for job-related reasons, self-improvement, recreation, hobby, home buying and selling, and so on (Riesman, 1980, p.180).

This legacy of the past two decades has given most contemporary community colleges their three chief distinguishing characteristics: their untraditional students, their vocationalism, and their ever-changing offerings.* It is just these characteristics, but especially the first,

*It should be noted that with the decline in the number of 18-year-olds, many four-year colleges are coming to resemble community colleges insofar as they draw locally, and are increasingly vocational, adult-oriented, and offering compensatory programs.

which make the whole issue of standards so difficult in the community college. As stated by Arthur Cohen and Florence Brawer:

> The guiding and teaching of students unprepared for traditional college-level studies is the thorniest single problem for community colleges. Some institutions seem to have given up, as evidenced by their tendencies to award certificates and degrees for any combination of courses, units or credits, in effect sending their students away with the illusion of having had a successful college career. Others have mounted massive instructional and counseling services especially for the lower-ability, stratagems designed to puncture the balloon of prior school failure. But in most programs in most institutions, expectations for student achievement have declined. The weight of the low-ability student hangs like an anchor on the community college (Cohen and Brawer, 1982, p.232).

It was no accident that during these two decades great numbers of two-year schools began changing their names from junior to community colleges, and the new ones being built were, most of them, called the latter from the very start. Students of social movements tell us that whenever any group tries to alter its status in society it usually begins by changing its title, as when Negroes became Blacks or Miss and Mrs. became Ms. It is a symbolic gesture but one with deep meaning, for it signifies in our daily language that people want to be regarded and treated in a new way, and that, if the movement is at all successful, its members will enjoy a new complex of rights, duties, and privileges. In part, then, the switch in title

was a response to very real changes in the purposes and characteristics of community colleges, but it also was, though not for all community colleges, a defensive reaction against being too closely identified with a local secondary school system. Even today one still hears references to this in the pejorative description of community colleges as "high schools with ash trays", and it is still true that community colleges are in an ambiguous, twilight position in the educational hierarchy. Although more likely now to be under state than local jurisdiction, they still retain their traditional and philosophic ties with the local schools and the community. Yet despite the emphasis on being a highly responsive institution of, by, and for the community, recognition that many of their activities are sufficiently different than those of high schools leads the lay public, planning agencies, community college insiders and national commissions to see them as part of the world of higher education.

This ambiguous status causes a chronic strain in community college life, one which has much to do with standards. How rigid or high should standards be in a hybrid institution designed to meet the needs of diverse groups of students? Raising the standards too high, whether in vocational or liberal arts curricula, risks reaching the point of diminishing returns with the school turning away in great numbers those whom its ideology puts at center stage. Excessively low standards, however, are to both students

and society an obvious cheat. Although community colleges vary as greatly as senior colleges in size, curricula, and quality (which makes it a struggle to generalize about them), there is a widespread feeling among community college insiders and, in some areas, among state legislators, that they have increasingly been offering less than college-level instruction. Though the evidence is scant, where it does exist it shows that community college students are in fact being asked to read and write less than in the past, and that academic performance is declining (Cohen and Brawer, p.26-27). A very few community colleges, most notably Miami Dade in Florida and Passaic County in New Jersey, and some professional associations such as the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, have already responded with programs specifically designed to raise academic standards. More on these later. There first remains the effort to disentangle at least some of the sources of slippage. This is a terribly difficult task, and my modest hope is to point to but a few such sources, presented in no particular order of importance, indeed, uncertain that any of them deserve primacy.

One factor is the ambiguous status of the faculty. If community colleges are in an ambiguous position, so too are those who teach in them, and there is a growing body of literature testifying to the frustrations many community college teachers have in defining their roles. To meet the needs and problems of high-risk or untraditional students,

there has been over the past two decades not only an enormous increase in the number of high-risk students but also new programs, pedagogies and "instructional technologies", all of with which community college faculty have had to familiarize themselves. Furthermore, because of the emphasis on teaching, community college instructors spend one-and-a-half to two times as many hours in the classroom and usually with less pay and prestige than their contemporaries in four-year institutions (Bayer, 1974, p.26; Cohen and Brawer, 1982, p.72-74). Yet two-year faculty have not had the larger voice in determining their clientele or academic or public policy with respect to their services. As David Riesman comments, "Community college faculty members experienced only at considerable remove the victory of the faculty that Jencks and I termed the 'academic revolution'" (Riesman, 1982, p.181). Thus, faculty had relatively little to say in creating or endorsing the open-door policy, and, in fact, many do question it and all they are asked to do in its name, as with, for example, the dim view taken toward individualized learning, a pedagogy seized upon by many community colleges in an attempt to manage the teaching problems posed by low and underachieving students (Busnell, 1973, p.39; Weddington, 1976, p.39-40; London, 1978, chap. 5).

Among faculty in general, there are numerous reports of low faculty morale, frustration and resentment (London, 1980). In part, this is due to their relative

powerlessness in their dealings with college administrators, which is one reason Riesman cites for the early success of faculty unions in community colleges, the other being the absence of a strong "ethos of academic professionalism that made the union movement seem not wholly appropriate" (Riesman, 1980, p.181). But there is another kind of powerlessness, not having to do with any perceived arbitrariness of administrators, but rather with students. If we view all colleges and universities along a continuum of commitment--and by commitment I mean the extent to which students are expected to internalize faculty values concerning intellectual work--we may find that at one end are the very best undergraduate colleges, colleges where a large nucleus of students, perhaps even a small majority, judge themselves according to faculty values. At the other pole are most community colleges which, given their mission and diverse body of student commuters, call for little such commitment (Riesman, 1980, pp.11, 179). It would be a disservice to ignore the efforts of many community college teachers who work imaginatively and with great dedication to draw the best from students. It would also be misleading to omit that there are, of course, some students, especially older students, who are committed and eager to hear what teachers offer. But the larger reality is that most "new students", particularly those who come right from high school and are usually in the bottom third of their class, are wary, unreceptive, and unenthusiastic (Cross, 1971),

p.13-16; London, 1978, chap.1). As any actor knows, it is difficult to play with conviction from day to day to a cool audience. A clue to how widespread the problem may be is found in a 1977 national survey of two-year college science instructors. Other than teachers of compensatory courses, most felt their job satisfaction would be improved were "students better prepared to handle course requirements." Out of sixteen possible choices, this far outranked all others (Cohen and Brawer, 1982, p.236).

Such a situation poses extraordinary and painful dilemmas for faculty, whether at four or two-year colleges. For some years now faculty have been unable to assume that students' performance in the three R's is on more than an elementary or junior high school level. Putting aside for the moment an institutional response, among the alternatives available to individual teachers there is only one that does not signal a drop in standards, and that is to retain standards, with or without a reworking of one's own teaching methods, even if that means failing a large proportion of students. Other options involve teaching the course with eyes half closed ("faking it") and giving passing grades with the almost certain knowledge that students have not done the work, diluting the course and teaching at a reduced level of abstraction and complexity, not teaching the course as advertised but instead concentrating on basic skills, or trying to ignore the problem by assigning easier reading, less writing and more objective examinations in

order to avoid students' writing problems. (Similar strategies are found in the university. See Trow, 1982, p.22.)

Community college faculty, however, have a built-in rationale for lessening the difficulty of coursework and inflating grades, and that is to bolster the confidence of their unsure students. I believe this strategy may be as common and as anguished over now as when, some years ago, I was told by one teacher:

> It's a bitch! Grading is horrendous. It's a horrendous problem...you do your best...I don't know whether this is a personal thing or what [but] I find myself being quite lenient with the lower end of the scale. In other words, I hesitate very much to flunk someone if they've made any kind of effort at all...How do I rationalize that? Because I'm being very honest with you, I do rationalize this... It's kind of a peculiar thing, but I kind of say to myself, "Well, look, if it was going to be injurious to them, then I wouldn't want to do that ...but if I give a low grade, I might eliminate them prematurely". You have to retain some standards, but if school is a place for people to grow, then you have to allow for early mistakes for that initial poor performance and the poor education they got in their high schools (London, 1978, p.124-5).

Said another, somewhat more directly:

> I'm grading high. I've established a grading system to grade high on purpose as a motivating factor, motivating and morale, and give the students who might be discouraged by flunking immediately or thinking he's going to, to realize that they can succeed and then tighten up standards as much as you can in regard to each individual as they progress... But the way I'm grading is still so that a C student could get an A (London, 1978, p.124).

Another way in which the ambiguous place of the community college affects faculty and the imposition of standards is by creating some distance between individual teachers and their academic disciplines. When compared with their counterparts in four-year colleges, community college faculty are less likely to read scholarly journals, to attend meetings of academic associations (they are often snubbed or treated as inferior if they do), and to publish in scholarly or scientific journals (Bayer, 1974, p.26; Cohen and Brawer, 1977, p.109-118). Distance from disciplines is further increased by the continued reluctance of community colleges to hire new Ph.D.'s, especially if they seem more interested in research than in teaching high-risk students, but also because of their higher salaries.

Today, only about 14 percent of community college faculty hold a doctorate (Cohen and Brawer, 1982, p.76-7). Never having the opportunity to teach courses beyond the sophomore level also contributes to academic isolation by making it less urgent to keep up in one's field, which may in time have an enervating effect (London, 1978, p.115-119).

Perhaps this isolation is part of the phenomenon wherein a higher cultural value is placed on the production of new knowledge than on the diffusion of what is already known. The former always carries with it a higher status because it ultimately helps define the nature of nature and human nature. The closer any profession is to this defining function, the greater its control over services and

clients and the greater is prestige (Hughes, 1963). One wonders whether the greater separation from this function makes it more likely that community college faculty feel removed from higher education, however important their teaching may be for their students. This is not to suggest that all community college teachers are frustrated college professors. However, that a recent study found that about half of all instructors, while happy with their current positions, would rather teach in a four-year college or university suggests at least some ambivalence toward their work, and that community college teachers, too, are susceptible to seeing themselves as "less than" rather than the "different than" that the profession's ideology puts forth. This is an area that has not been examined in depth on anything more than a case-study basis, and we are left to wonder about the extent to which, throughout the ranks of community college instructors, this remove is welcomed or lamented.

Let me forward a "worst case scenario". Among those who lament the estrangement, as already discussed, are many for whom the teaching of low-ability students is particularly frustrating. There may well be countervailing and uplifting definitions of their work within the faculty peer groups, but if not, then the situation is clearly demoralizing and hence not one in which people can be easily mobilized to fight hard and long for higher exit standards. Indeed, such an effort may be, if the sense of

powerlessness and isolation run deep enough, quite threatening to the pleasing and secure aspects of the work culture that do remain. David Riesman reports that upon recruitment a new faculty member, especially if a Ph.D., is likely to be "warned that any attempt greatly to raise the level of instruction will prove both unsuccessful and frustrating" (1980, p.192). A more sanguine possibility is that faculty frustrations can be used to enlist their support in forming and instituting new institutional policies designed specifically to raise students' performance, as has been done at Miami-Dade (discussed below).

The extensive use of part-timers in community colleges also has its costs in morale and, though difficult to document, most likely in standards as well. In 1974, one-half of all community college instructors were part-timers; in 1980, 56 percent (American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 1974-1981). With the exception of the military reserves, it is difficult to think of a major institution in our society where the front line work is carried out by hundreds of thousands of part-timers. From an administrative cost-accounting approach, there are several advantages to such a heavy reliance: specialized courses can be offered, part-timers are more willing to hold class at odd times and places, they are less expensive, can be easily hired for an unexpected demand, and conversely, can be easily dismissed when enrollments fall (Cohen and Brawer, 1982, p.70-1). From a faculty perspective, this can become

a horribly exploitative and alienating situation, with their having little or no say in regard to what, where and when they will be teaching, yet with the certainty that they will be paid less, receive no fringe benefits, and have no office space. In regard to the community life of the college, part-timers rarely participate in campus activities, seldom talk with students out of class, and have virtually no contact with their colleagues (Marsh and Lomb, 1976; Friedlander, 1979). Furthermore, they are more likely to be hired quickly and less likely to be evaluated than full-timers; in short, they are not as systematically screened. There is no data on the extent to which, if at all, standards are diluted by part-timers to curry students' favor in the hope that it will help one to be re-hired. The situation, however, is clearly one not designed to inspire faculty to adhere to high standards for their students, particularly if that makes more work for them (the faculty) while they are rushing about town, as often is the case, from one part-time job to another.

Student consumerism also figures prominently in any explanation of academic decline. In part, this was a demographic phenomenon: the great expansion of higher education in general and community colleges in particular of the 1960's and 1970's has been followed by a period of decline in the number of traditional college-aged students. Community colleges, having already established themselves as for adults of all ages, and having already devised

strategies for tapping the adult markets (they were never shy about marketing themselves) were correspondingly less threatened by the decline. A changing population pyramid only explains so much, however, as many of the signs of erosion throughout higher education appeared long before the drop in the student pool: grade inflation, "non-punitive grading", sanitized transcripts, the call for relevance, the dropping of requirements, the pandering to what, in some cases, was a shockingly narrow vocationalism, and the elimination of writing assignments. It was not rampant but it was a sign of the times when professors began tacking up posters to advertise their courses: "Come on in. This course is fun. It's easy. It's righteous. Hell, it's downright mellow. What's more, the professor dresses like a roofer and you call him Ray..." (Chase, 1980, p.104). All of this and more is familiar to any observer of higher education, and it is as familiar on community college campuses as on any other.

In On Higher Education, David Riesman describes, with great insight, how this trend toward student consumerism reflected, indeed was a part of, the larger transformation wrought by the "victory of the counterculture" in the 1960's and early 1970's. It is worth briefly summarizing his argument, for it sheds considerable light on exit standards as they are today, and provides by implication a strong rationale for a useful, if somewhat general, next step. Riesman carefully distinguishes between the

counterculture of the 1960's on which he casts a jaundiced eye, and the political activism of that day, with which he sympathizes. The latter "promised work, frustration, even possible arrest" to those students who aspired to become public-interest lawyers, community health practitioners, investigative journalists, and other varieties of public advocates. The counterculture, however, "was a seduction toward a socially irresponsible hedonism", meaning "liberation" not only in matters sexual and pharmacological, but also, in a section he titled "Meritocracy Defeats Itself", a devaluing, and even worse, a delegitimizing of the authority of the professorate, the university, and traditional academic values (p.83-84).

Ironically, many faculty were drawn into the excesses of the counterculture,

> rapping with their students, casual about turning in syllabuses or grade lists and meeting other requirements dismissed as stuffy and bureaucratic, counting on the students' own tolerance to allow them to get away with the alleged spontaneity of doing <u>their</u> own thing (p.85).

The counterculture not only won out on campus, but

> has made its way throughout the society, even to the 'hard-hats' underneath whose helmets long hair is often visible--which, in an earlier era, would have been an occasion for antagonism between the affluent in their bluejeans and the working class with its more conservative cultural values (p.83).

Yet when the sons and daughters of the hard-hats--possibly the hard-hats themselves--as well as minorities found themselves in the community college, and this is my argument, not David Riesman's, it was seldom with the strident or well articulated disdain for the ways and values of the middle classes found among the avant-garde on college and university campuses. As but one indication, the general incidence of protest and demonstration was never as high on the two-year campuses as on the four. For then and today as well, there is among "new students" considerable apprehension when it comes to postsecondary education. Although they may learn of the local community college's reputation from friends who precede them, higher education is not an institution with which they, through their families, have had any experience. Thus, as I have written elsewhere, the most anxious students in community colleges are those who matriculate as liberal arts majors, the very act of which is a message to family and friends that they wish to walk a path that will take them away from the working-class world. Such a statement, in the face of peer pressure and the student's own self doubts, is most often made at some risk (London, 1978). Vocational students, too, have something to fear in the discouragement and embarrassment should they fail, to say nothing of possibly diminished employment prospects.

What is unique about today, however, is that this trepidation exists alongside the erosion of academic

authority of which Riesman writes. To put this in other words, having been socialized into the countercultural legacy, students' apprehensions are not necessarily transmuted into respect for the institution and its values. The situation is thus one in which the institution in some soft, grey, spread-out way--as part of the zeitgeist of a generation--does not command extensive moral authority and, as stated previously, asks for little commitment in the first place. My feeling is that this has a deleterious effect on students' level of effort and their persistence. It is analogous to the enormous increase over these some past twenty years in unmarried couples living together: diminished authority of the institution--marriage in this case--and an incomplete commitment as people try each other out, means tha one is always free, if uncomfortably so, to look at the arrangement with one foot out the door.

Thus while a superficial rationality might suggest that "new students" double their efforts to "improve themselves", they may well be constrained by the cumulative effects of their own biographies and their society's recent history. While this is certainly not a happy interpretation, it does perhaps tell us something about how many students approach "standards" as a general phenomenon, as well as indicate but one more factor to consider in explaining the still high drop-out rate among community college students.

Having just said this, it must also be said that the community college can and does make a difference in students' lives. (Some couples, after all, do marry successfully.) Any understanding of such benefits must first be placed, however, in the context of the oldest and foremost complaint about community colleges--that they play a major role in the tracking of students away from the liberal arts and into low-paying, blind-alley jobs.

In 1960, just as community colleges were beginning to alter dramatically the American educational landscape, Burton Clark published his now classic article, "The 'Cooling-Out' Function in Higher Education" (Clark, 1960). According to Clark, democratic societies ask individuals to act as if social mobility were universally possible, the belief being that social status and other rewards accrue to those who try. He then argued that since not everyone can make it to the top, democratic societies must also limit and block culturally-instilled goals in ways that "cool-out" people, that is, that let them down gradually and unexplosively. With resentment deflected and disappointment mollified, people to whom further opportunity is denied can be better induced to take less rewarding work. Two-year colleges serve just this function, Clark continued, by cooling students' aspirations through the gradually accumulated evidence (course grades, achievement test scores, vocational aptitude tests, teachers' recommendations, counselor's advice) that they ought to change to a

terminal or vocational curriculum rather than transfer to a four-year institution.

In a recent reconsideration of his thesis, Clark warns against extrapolating from what goes on within the community college "to grand theories about the role of education in society". Given the great difficulties in applying social science to social policy, he admonishes us to "tread gently, even upon the cooling-out process and its obviously unattractive features". He argues further that the cooling-out process may indeed be necessary as a mechanism of compromise among the often competing values of equity, competence, and individual choice (Clark, 1980, p.30). Clark's cautionary words are, in effect, a response to the New Left sociologists of education of the past two decades who, finding a resonance and congeniality between his thesis and their social class theorems, conducted extensive research along these appropriated lines. Among the many findings were that the cooling-out process did not always work smoothly, leaving many students frustrated and angry (London, 1978), that the skills taught in vocational curricula were especially subject to obsolescence, that unemployment rates for vocational graduates are high, that with the exception of those in health-related occupations there are no significant differences between the incomes of high school graduates and community college vocational graduates, that the jobs obtained have short and sometimes no career ladders, and that from one-half to three-quarters

(depending on the study) of vocational graduates do not get jobs related to their curriculum (Pincus, 1980). More recently it has been found that the chances of obtaining the baccalaureate, even for high ability students, are diminished if one begins in a two year rather than a four year college, and that community colleges receive substantially less public subsidy for instruction, library support, student aid, and educational and general purposes (Astin, 1982, p. 132, 142-4, 192).

Such findings led critics to believe there was little truth in the appellation "democracy's colleges", and that the community colleges' real recommendations are that they are cheap and nearby. It thus became difficult not to extrapolate from the research, and the portrait drawn was one in which the hidden function of community colleges is to preserve the status quo by obstructing or limiting rather than promoting the upward mobility of lower socioeconomic groups (Karabel, 1972; Zwerling, 1976; Pincus, 1980). From this perspective the community college at best helps students maintain their relative socioeconomic position in the face of a changing technology and occupational structure. It is, the argument goes, a cruel hoax played on "new students" that when a community college is built in their neighborhood they are told that a more traditional or liberal arts education is not for them; it is like suddenly finding religion only to be told God is dead.

The rise in vocationalism is made even more troublesome by its relationship to minority enrollment. As the proportion of community college students in vocational grew from 42.6 percent in 1970 to 62.5 percent in 1980 (see Table I) so too did the proportion of lower socio-economic students, especially those from minorities. By the end of the 1970's Blacks, Hispanics, and native Americans were one-fourth of all community college enrollments, or, from a different angle, community colleges were enrolling more than 40 percent of all minority students in higher education. (See Table II.)

To put it simply, as community colleges became poorer and less white, they became more vocational. Furthermore, the congeries of problems associated with attending a community college--a larger proportion of underprepared students, fewer and less well endowed institutional resources, the absence of a dormitory experience--exert an effect of their own: minority students who attend community colleges do less well academically than those of equal ability who begin in a four year college, and the differential is greater for them than it is for majority students (Astin, 1982, Chapter 5; Cohen and Brawer, 1982, p. 48).

While it is difficult to be sanguine, the situation may be neither as clear nor as insidious as the detractors say. The reliance on statistics, for example, can be misleading in that some unknown number of students drop out

Table II. Percentage of College Students Enrolled in Different Types of Institutions, Fall, 1978, by Racial or Ethnic Group

Group	Public Institutions			Private Institutions		
	Universities	Other Four-Year Institutions	Two-Year Colleges	Universities	Other Four-Year Institutions	Two-Year Colleges
Whites	19.7	24.8	33.2	6.5	14.6	1.3
Blacks	9.7	30.6	39.3	4.3	13.5	2.7
Hispanics	8.6	25.0	53.3	4.1	7.9	1.1
American Indians[a]	12.5	22.4	53.0	2.9	7.1	2.1
All Students	18.4	25.2	34.5	6.4	14.1	1.4

[a]Includes Alaskan Natives

Source: Astin (1982), Table 36.

not because they have failed or because the school has not done well by them. but because their new training has qualified them for a job for which the actual holding of the associate's degree is unnecessary. Cohen and Brawer also point out that just because students have moved from a liberal arts to a vocational curriculum does not necessarily mean that they have been coolad out; as evidence they note that since the mid 1970's more students have transferred to universities from vocational curricula (for example, a health related field, forestry, business) than from the liberal arts (1982, p. 301).

Another argument against the critics is the persistence of students in choosing vocational programs. It was possible in 1972 for Karabel to write, "Leaders of the occupational education movement have constantly bemoaned the lack of student enthusiasm for vocational education.... The problem, they believe, is the low status of career training in a society that worships the bachelor's degree.... Overall, students are voting with their feet against community college vocational programs." (p. 245-246). That the voting today is more in the occupational direction may be attributed to several factors. First, the status of career training has been raised by bringing it into four year colleges and universities, thus making it more attractive. Second, that vocational programs are already in place gives them a momentum of their own: they are often well adver-

tized and can be a viable and convenient alternative for students who know they do not want or can not get a traditional liberal arts education. Third, the lure of a job, especially if the initial salary is expected to be more than the student has ever made before even if it is low ceiling work, is made more attractive in a precarious economy. (Critics respond that such subjective assessments are not consistent with the objective facts that, as already discussed, the prospects for employment in one's vocational field with a two year degree are chancy, and that if hired the income level is not likely to be substantially greater than that of a high school graduate.)

The finding that the chances of obtaining a baccalaureate are diminished if one begins in a two year college must also be qualified by noting that no statistics are kept on those students who enroll in a community college for one or more semesters, drop out, but later matriculate in a four year college; nor are there reliable national statistics of community college graduates who go on for the bachelor's degree a year or more after receiving their associate's degree. It is estimated, however, that only about 5 percent of two year graduates transfer to a senior institution in the term following their graduation (Cohen and Brawer, 1982, p. 54).

Among those who do transfer, whether immediately or otherwise, are many for whom a bachelor's degree would

have been impossible without the community college. The community college can provide a setting in which, through supportive peer groups and positive, informal contact with faculty, students are able to overcome their lack of confidence in their own academic abilities (Neumann and Riesman, 1980). Having taken the life histories of several students over the past two years, the following excerpt tells us much about the nooks and crannies of higher education and how students, with the help of friends and faculty, can move through the system. The student speaking has recently received her liberal arts degree cum laude from a state university:

> Beside all the courses [in the community college] there was also a study group you had to attend. It wasn't so much a study group, it was this guy, a great guy, who'd come in and we'd do these exercises in communication. A lot of the students needed it. They needed to feel more comfortable in the environment that they were in. They needed to talk about the college, interacting with other students, about getting involved. _____ was the guy, and he was really into people knowing themselves and figuring out what they're doing and why they're there. And it was O.K. but it just took up a lot of time and after being there for about a month or two, I started getting interested in other things and I just felt that it was too much. They knew wherever I was all the time. Like if I didn't show up at that communication group and I was in the newspaper office, they'd come down and get me...I worked for the newspaper. I did lay out and stuff after I met a couple of people. So I was really getting involved in that kind of stuff which was making me very happy because I started making friends and I had a place to go at the school where I

could just go and sit down and do nothing. But the communication group said, 'No, no, you can't do that, you made your commitment and you have to come back here and do this'. And I don't need it. I was getting an A in the reading, an A in math, English was easy, my psych I got an A in that semester. I was just doing good. It was easy, because I did have the skills but didn't know it... When I got my grades I got a 3.0. I ended up with two A's, and B and a C. And to me I thought that was the best thing in the world. I thought that was great. And mean here I am. I was scared to death of being here and I came in and I did it. Plus I made a lot of friends and I got involved. And the counselor [the teacher of the communications course] who I did respect told me I should have done a lot better and they would like to see me stay in close contact with them the second semester and, oh Jesus, all that stuff. Well, like I couldn't believe it. They were probably right but at the time I didn't listen to them. But after the first year I started looking at it saying to myself, 'I'm not going to go anywhere here', because it was only a two-year college. I wasn't really into liberal arts, I really wanted to specialize but there was not much there [in the curriculum] that I wanted to do...Plus to me time was real important, money was real important. Plus I wasn't thinking too clear, in my other life, which I call my other life from school, there was nothing. All the people I was still hanging around with were still the same people. I had one or two friends from school but they were older. One was 36, she was the mother of 4, but she was my friend. And I had a lot to do with her. We did have homework on this or that...She was probably the one who dragged me to the newspaper more or less and pushed me into social situations, and gave me a lot of confidence about things like that. Plus she was real smart, I thought. She was a wiz in English and in literature and all that stuff. She was really good... She pushed me to go to the cafeteria and sit down with a group of people I didn't know, and she'd introduce me and she'd

> say something funny about me. And I'd laugh and people would talk to me and I'd be able to talk with them...

This student's peer group, mostly older women, was one which encouraged her academic efforts, and combined with the teacher of the communications seminar about whom she felt ambivalent but who clearly had a positive effect on her, she was on her halting, erratic road toward emancipation from her other non-college friends "who were still the same people". She will, however, never show up in the statistics as a community college "success". She dropped out of the community college during her second year for personal reasons, only to enroll the following year in a senior institution, where despite some reoccurrence of the initial fears, she quickly regained her confidence.

Her story also helps make clear that to be a successful student often takes more than academic skills; it takes social skills too, including confidence and ease with others. Pedagogy and counseling may have some effect on performance, these students in effect told me, but it is no substitute for being socialized into a group of friends who want you to do well and who will work with you toward that end. In other words, the setting of standards is just as much, if not more, a social phenomenon among equals as it is an academic matter between teacher and student.

Indeed, I strongly suspect that compensatory or counseling programs that are overly bureaucratized--that begin by having students fill out forms and take batteries

of achievement and personality tests--very quickly, perhaps at the very outset, reach the point of diminishing returns. They are but one more representation of an institution with which students are unfamiliar and which easily frightens them. Said another student:

> During orientation we had to take these tests and I went to the room we were supposed to go to but there's a sign that says it will be in this other building. Well I'm already scared about this, figuring, you know, what am I doing here. I don't belong here. And I don't know anything about these tests except that someone's going to find out that I don't know anything. So I started walking toward the other building but I saw my car first, and didn't even think about it but just got in and drove home.

This hardly means that all institutional attempts to raise standards are futile, but it does imply that the attempt must be sufficiently dramatic to alter the student culture, at least that part of it which defines how hard and in what direction students will work. One way to do this, though it means partly closing the open door, is to do as Passaic County Community College and Miami-Dade Community College have done: tighten standards even if it means losing students. In Florida, complaints from the public that too many students were graduating with too little proficiency in reading, writing and mathematics, and complaints from faculty that they were unable to teach classes with so many students so lacking in these same skills led Miami-Dade, under the direction of its President, Robert McCabe, to require the passing of basic skills

courses for those who did not pass their initial placement tests. At the same time, a core curriculum was phased in, requiring five courses spread among the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. The goal was to reverse the downward spiral of expectations which occurs when, according to McCabe, a student is allowed to progress through school with little serious attention given to basic skills (Dubocq, 1981, p.27). Accompanying the new policies were new programs to monitor student progress so that they would have to demonstrate competence before moving on, variable timetables to allow students who are further behind sufficient time to complete a curriculum, and a re-emphasis on counseling so that students have more information on how to resolve academic problems. Furthermore, the college was willing to stand by its commitment to hold standards: 8,000 students were dismissed or suspended since the changes were implemented in 1978. Hardest hit were Black students, though by 1980 there was a 44 percent drop in the suspension of Blacks (Dubocq, p.31). Despite great concern that the new standards might be interpreted as de facto exclusion, that academic performance has improved (as reported by the college's own studies) has won over most students:

> It has even won the support of most Black students...said Bennie L. Wiley, Jr., associate dean for intercurricular studies and adviser to the United Black Students organization.
>
> The new policies, said Mr. Wiley, "have made Black students more aware that they

> have to have good academic skills in order to compete successfully in this society" (Middleton, 1981, p.4).*

Certainly, Miami-Dade's program does not solve, nor was it designed to solve, the problem of tracking. Indeed, it might be argued that since most of its students are still in vocational curricula, the new policies only turn out better workers, albeit workers with at least a core of liberal arts courses--but workers nonetheless. To the extent that aspirations are unfairly muted and potentialities stunted, this is of course a debilitating problem to both the individual and society, and one that this side of utopia we should never cease trying to resolve.

However, there is another side to the vocational coin. If we think of higher standards not just as

*Perhaps this is the reverse of what Riesman observed of students (of all races) in the 1960's when they were occasionally surprised that campus authorities acceded to their protest demands. Given the more recent conservative tenor of students, one wonders about the intensity--or lack of it--of student reaction today to the imposition of new and higher standards. It might put students between Scylla and Charybdis, but it is less likely that politicizing the issue by claiming "standards" is a code word for elitism and exclusion would find mass appeal among today's students. In an era of fewer students and greater market pressures, however, it is doubtful that many colleges will be willing to take the risk for fear of scaring off potential students. It may be that those colleges most in demand by students and thus those that have less to fear in the declining number of students, can most afford to work changes. There is some irony in this in that it lumps together the Ivy League universities, the smaller elite liberal arts colleges, and large urban community colleges.

improvements in reading, writing and mathematics, but as the broadening of horizons, then the issue of standards becomes entwined with that of curriculum. It is of some significance, then, that most community colleges do presently require a minimum of liberal arts courses in their vocational curricula, even if it is not a common "core" as at Miami-Dade. Courses in English, social sciences, math and history are almost universally required of degree program students, often as mandated by the state. Many career programs require additional liberal arts work, for example, law enforcement majors taking urban society and race relations, or fire science students taking chemistry. It is undoubtedly the case that whatever minimum requirements exist become for many students the maximum they take, yet it would be of great interest to find out how many take more as electives.

Still, it is true that their exposure to liberal arts is not the same relatively intense, resocializing experience that students are more likely to encounter at a four-year residential college. Furthermore, when we speak of the determination of standards of thought and expression in the four-year liberal arts college, we are generally speaking of an institution more constrained by tradition and less responsive to the needs of the local labor markets than are community colleges. Since part of this tradition is that liberal arts colleges are more critically concerned with the cultivation of broad human sympathies and the

capacity for independent and critical judgment that comes with familiarity with the humanities, arts, sciences, and social sciences, there is considerable merit in the argument that community college vocational students are again losing out. But it is too easy to assume that none of the goals of a liberal arts curriculum are cultivated in the community college! Despite the powerful peer pressures not to do too well (or at least not to appear to do too well) that I have documented elsewhere (London, 1978), and despite the zeitgeist described earlier in this paper which militates against student achievement, it would be insupportable and condescending to argue that having students take some liberal arts is folly or wasted effort. We simply do not know what effect these courses have on community college students.

Along these same lines, another constant of community college life must be recognized, and that is that one would be hard put to find a community college without at least one instructor with a flair for turning students on to ideas. At most community colleges there is probably a small nucleus of faculty who, despite the common notion that the more pragmatic students would not enroll in their courses, can and do draw students precisely because their classrooms are exciting and challenge students' ideas, values, and tastes.

However, a teacher need not be dramatic to be enlightening. As I have observed at more than one community college (and my own state four-year college), students may not be responsive in class and may appear to be doing little more than watching the sun describe an arc in the sky (heliotropic students, I call them), but listen in on their conversations (in the name of science only) in the hallways, cafeteria, or on the green (would that I could be a fly in a commuter's car) and it is not long before you hear talk of this or that teacher, of such and such an assignment, and behold, an idea that was discussed in class! I have also talked with students who have read books, assigned or otherwise, but who have kept that fact from their friends. They may have been told God is dead, but some at least pray in private.

Unfortunately this does not characterize the experience of most "new students". Indeed, what I have just argued and what immediately follows is not a claim that community colleges are really filled with nascent or closet intellectuals (four-year colleges are not that either), nor is it an apology for the non-meritocratic tracking that does occur. But to hold that the tracking of students must of necessity be in every case immoral is bothersome. It is, of course, unfair and does detract from the legitimacy of the educational system when people are channelled, either downward or upward, on the basis of criteria other than ability. This is precisely the complaint of the educational critics discussed earlier, and there is great

merit to their argument. But, if too rigidly applied, and if in the name of orthodoxy of thought we are too willing to overlook the corners of institutions in which good things do happen, then their position becomes condescending. It is as if someone who only knew what we knew would make "better" career and life decisions. And here we return once again to pondering the meaning of "better". Is it "better" (happier, more productive?) to find oneself choking on a white collar in the middle or upper reaches of some bureaucracy, trading our integrity for the illusory pleasures of security?* Or is it "better" to live close to the belt and work at a succession of jobs which are tedious, alienating, and low-paying? These are the extreme conditions; fortunately, most biographies fall somewhere in between.

I am not suggesting that graduates of community college vocational programs are lucky in their ignorance, that if they only knew what was done to them, they'd be upset, even furious. I am not saying this because I am not saying they are ignorant so that, as one commentator has put it,

*At least one social critic, Earl Shorris, thinks that blue-collar workers are happier than the people upstairs. Their unions afford them a juridicial relationship to their employers so that they know, unlike many of their bosses, what is expected of them, what the grievance procedures are, and how to renegotiate working conditions. Also, since they are expected to lend only their hands to an enterprise, they will not find themselves having to abdicate heart and soul. Shorris' recommendation is that middle levels of corporations themselves become more "juridicial".
Earl Shorris, Politics of Middle Management: Scenes from Corporate Life. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1981.

"If community educators want to help working class and minority students, they should provide them with an historical and political context from which to understand the dismal choices they face" (Pincus, 1980, p.356). Most of these students already know about "dismal choices", even if that knowledge is not well grounded historically and politically; they know especially if they have already experienced economic insecurity or dead-end and meaningless work.* Indeed, when we speak of standards, we tend to forget that while our immediate concern is with academic standards, our ultimate concern, that which gives rise to our caring about academic standards in the first place, is with standards of living--for each individual and for civilization as a whole. And "standards of living" refer not just to economic well-being, as fundamentally important as that is. It also means "satisfaction with life", and while what constitutes "satisfaction" may itself be an artifact of class relations as well as of ethnic culture, to speak in a broad way of "mere vocationalism" assumes that all or most blue or white-collar proletarians are less satisfied and all the rest of us are more satisfied with life. Philosophically, that is a difficult position to defend.

*I have long thought that one of the problems with contemporary thinking and research about community college students, tracking, and curriculum is that it assumes that it knows what students don't know, and does not investigate what students do know about what has happened to them, about choices, about work.

I do not mean to belittle in even the smallest way the anguish that underprepared and unsure students have about their fates, nor is this--at the risk of overemphasis -- an implicit endorsement of a status quo which tracks students on the basis of social class or race. Indeed, if there is one suggestion I would be so bold as to make to the Commission, it would be that given the serious and well-taken reservations about vocational programs in the community college, the Commission itself should consider recommending a prominent liberal arts component in every vocational program, even if it means, perhaps especially if it means, fewer vocational courses in a student's education. This, of course, bucks the national trend toward ever more vocationalism; perhaps it will put the brakes to it.

Whatever shape a re-invigorated liberal arts core takes in any particular community college, the purpose of it would and should be the same as the rationale for the liberal arts as an idea: to help students--however directly or indirectly--better understand their lives and their world so that they make good decisions and judgments about both. Perhaps that means becoming politicized, most likely not. As long as it means that each of us in our own way lives just a bit "better". Then the community college can be said to have made a difference.

APPENDIX I

VOCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN THE 27 COMMUNITY COLLEGES
OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON

Accounting Occupations:
- Accountant
- Bookkeeper
- Calculating Machine Operator
- Income Tax Specialist

Administrative Assistant/
Office Manager

Agricultural Production:
- Farmer, General
- Irrigator

Animal Services:
- Veterinary Hospital Attendant

Appliance Repairer

Auto Body Repairer

Aviation Occupations:
- Air Freight Agent
- Air Traffic Control Specialist
- Airframe & Power Plant Mechanic
- Flight Attendant
- Ticket Agent

Barbering/Cosmetology:
- Beauty Shop Manager
- Cosmetologist

Cabinetmaker

Camera Repairer

Care & Guidance of Children:
- Child Care Attendant
- Day Care Worker
- Nursery School Teacher
- Teacher Aide

Chemical Laboratory Technician

Commercial Art:
- Commercial Artist
- Interior Designer/Decorator

Communications:
- Announcer, Radio/TV
- Audio-Visual Equipment Technician
- Broadcast Technician
- Media Technician
- Micrographics
- TV Studio Technician (Sound Mixer)

Construction:
- Carpenter
- Operating Engineer

Data Processing:
- Business Systems Analyst
- Computer Operator
- Computer Peripheral Equipment Operator
- Keypunch Operator
- Programmer, Business
- Programmer, Detail

Dental Occupations:
- Dental Assistant
- Dental Hygienist
- Dental Lab Technician

Dietetic Technician

Diver (Commercial)

Drafting:
- Drafter, Architectural
- Drafter, Civil
- Drafter, Commercial
- Drafter, Mechanical

Electrical:
- Electrical Power Technician
- Electrician, Industrial
- Instrumentation Technician

Electronics:
- Bio-Medical Equipment Technician
- Biochemistry Technologist
- Electronics Mechanic
- Electronics Technician
- Electronics Technician, Aviation
- Electronics Technician, Computer
- Electronics Technician, Industrial
- Radio/TV Repairer

Engineering Occupations:
- Chemical Technician
- Engineering Technician
- Industrial Engineering Technician
- Manufacturing Engineering Technician
- Marine Engineer
- Mechanical Engineering Technician
- Safety Engineering Technician
- Surveyor Helper
- Technical Illustrator
- Traffic Engineering Technician

Farrier (Horseshoer)

Fashion Merchandising:
- Display Designer
- Fashion Designer

Finance & Credit:
- Bank Manager
- Bank Teller
- Credit & Collection Manager

Fire Service:
- Fire Chief
- Firefighter

Food Preparation & Service:
- Baker
- Cook Helper
- Cook, Short Order
- Cook, Restaurant
- Restaurant Manager
- Waiter/Waitress

Food Processing Technician

Forestry:
- Forester Aide
- Logger, All-Around
- Logging Equipment Operator
- Park Ranger Assistant
- Park Worker

Gamekeeper

Heating/Cooling Systems:
- Air Conditioning Mechanic
- Refrigeration Mechanic

Horticulture:
- Greenskeeper
- Horticulture Supervisor
- Horticulture Worker
- Landscape Gardener

Hotel & Lodging:
- Lodging Facilities Manager

Human Services:
- Alcoholism Counselor Aide
- Gerontology Paraprofessional
- Interpreter (Deaf)
- Mental Retardation Technician
- Occupational Therapy Aide

Janitor

Jeweler

Justice, Administration of:
- Correction Officer
- Police Inspector
- Security Guard

Labor Relations Specialist

Library Assistant

Machinist

Maritime:
- Boat Builder
- Boat Repairer
- Marine Deck Officer

Marketing & Sales:
- Business Services Salesperson
- Cashier-Checker
- Farm & Garden Equipment Salesperson
- Farm Sales
- General Food Sales Representative
- General Salesperson
- Home Furnishings Sales Representative
- Insurance Agent
- Parts Clerk, Auto
- Purchasing Agent
- Retail Foods Manager
- Sales Manager, Assistant
- Service Representative (Information Clerk)
- Service Station Attendant
- Service Station Manager

Meat Cutter

Mechanics:
- Auto Mechanic
- Diesel Mechanic
- Farm Equipment Mechanic
- Fluid Power Technician
- Motorcycle Mechanic
- Small Engine Repairer

Medical Services:
- Echocardiography Technician
- Histopathology Technologist
- Inhalation Therapist
- Medical Lab Technician
- Operating Room Technician
- Physical Therapy Attendant
- Psychiatric Aide
- Radiologic Technologist (X-Ray)
- Ward Clerk

Millwright

Musical Instrument Repairer

Needle Trades:
- Power Sewing Machine Operator
- Shop Tailor

Nuclear Technician

Nursing:
- Cardio-Pulmonary Technician
- Medical Assistant
- Nurse Aide
- Nurse, General Duty RN
- Nurse, Licensed Practical
- Orderly

Nursing Home Administrator

Office Machine Servicer

Ophthalmic:
- Dispensing Optician
- Optometric Assistant

Pharmacy Assistant

Photography:
- Photographer, Biomedical
- Photographer, Commercial

Pilot

Printing & Graphics:
- Duplicating Machine Operator
- Lithographer
- Offset Operator
- Silk-Screen Artist

Quality Control:
- Quality Control Technician
- Standards Laboratory Technician

Real Estate:
- Real Estate Agent
- Real Estate Broker

Recreational:
- Ski Instructor
- Swimming Pool Manager

Secretarial:
- Automatic Typewriter Operator
- Calculating Machine Operator
- Clerk, General Office
- Clerk-Typist
- Court Reporter
- File Clerk
- Medical Record Clerk
- Receptionist
- Secretary
- Stenographer
- Transcribing Machine Operator
- Typist

Sheet Metal Worker

Stage Scenery Designer

Trailer Rebuilder

Transportation:
- Transport Driver
- Terminal Manager

Watch Repairer

Water Resources:
- Watershed Manager

Welding:
- Arc Welder
- Combination Welder
- Heat, Plastics Welder

Source: "Occupational Training in Washington State", Washington State Commission for Vocational Education, 1979.

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